

November 8 : Scriptures John 16-18

SUMMARY

Chapter 16 continues Jesus' Last Passover discourse.

He says, "I've told you these things." What things? The inevitable persecution and the Holy Spirit's help (15:18-27). Why does Jesus remind them of this? Because He won't be with them as He was at the beginning, i.e., His presence to protect and defend them. But now that Jesus is "going away" (ascension to heaven after death/resurrection), He'll still be with them via His indwelling Holy Spirit (as promised in 14:16-17, 16:7-8, 13), and He will continue His work of convicting the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:8).

Jesus withholds more info because His disciples aren't ready to "carry the burden of it" (per the Greek) yet. For that, they'll need the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth and what's to come (16:). What the Father has, Jesus has, and They will convey it to the disciples through the Holy Spirit (16:); access to God's mind, will, and emotions (read 1 Corinthians 10:10-14).

Jesus turns again to what's coming, His death and resurrection. "Don't worry about understanding what I said. Know this, like a woman in labor, you'll hurt for a while (His crucifixion and death), but your pain will shift to joy when the time comes (His resurrection). And after that, a new way to relate and interact with the Heavenly Father will open up." They'll be able to approach the God of Heaven and Earth directly, and He'll hear their prayers and answer them! Woo-hoo!

Getting back to the disciples not being able to understand the fullness of what He tells them, Jesus again reassures them they will "get it" when the time comes. Up to now, it appears they've been relying on Jesus to ask the Father for everything. But when Jesus completes His works, they will be able to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Through Jesus, "A better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God" (Hebrews 7:19), and "Now without faith it is impossible to please God, since the one who draws near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). "And a couple of other things, guys. Your Heavenly Father loves you!" (16:27) and the "Where I'm going" is I'm leaving the world and going back to My Father (16:28).

This statement the disciples understand with a child-like trust in Jesus. And yet, Jesus warns them that their faith can quickly fail. In fact, it will happen. All the disciples will abandon Jesus, but He tells them about it ahead of time, so they'll have peace that Jesus knew all along.

Chapter 17 is remarkable because it records three prayers by Jesus; to His Father, for His immediate disciples, and to all disciples who "believe in me through their word" (17:20) – *us!*

First, Jesus asks for the Father to glorify Him, which will bring glory to the Father. In John-speak, this Jesus prays for the crucifixion to be successful and that through His completed work, His Father will gain glory for providing the way for all people to come back to Him if they desire (17:1). When His work is finished, Jesus will have Father-granted authority to draw people to His Father and reveal Him to them to be saved. Also, because Jesus has finished His work of salvation, He can again take up the divine glory He laid down to come to earth (Philippians 2:7).

Second, Jesus prays for His immediate disciples (17:), who received God's revelation (the Light that came into the World, 1:9-10) and believed the Father's illuminating Word (17:8). Jesus prays that the Father protect them and set them apart to Himself via the truth the disciples now know (17:11-12, 15, 17, 19).

Third, Jesus prays for born-again believers who follow Him (17:20-266-19). That's us! When people face death, life becomes clear, and priorities come into focus. As Jesus faced death, what was the focal point of His concern for us? "May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me" (17:21). Jesus prayed that His followers would stand together as one in love. If I'm reading this right, our love for one another and united stand is our primary witness to the world. Is it any wonder Satan has worked so hard to divide Christians and make us hate each other? That way, the world won't see Jesus or the way back to our Creator and Heavenly Father. But if we love one another and stand united in Jesus, we affirm our unity with Jesus and the Father, and it becomes a beacon of spiritual light to help anyone find their way to eternal life.

What Jesus prays next for us is awesome. He prays for His Father to ensure we all are with Him in His kingdom and see His full glory (17:24). Why? We believe, based on testimonies, not seeing Jesus with our eyes. But there's a blessing: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (20:29).

Now the darkness envelopes Jesus. Chapter 18 begins Jesus' final hours. Judas brings the soldiers to Gethsemane because he knows where Jesus and the disciples would often meet and rest (18:2). John points out a few things in his account. Jesus isn't surprised and knows fully what's coming (18:4). He asks them who they're looking for, and they reply, "Jesus of Nazareth." What happens next connects to Jesus' self-revelation in chapter 10. He responds to the soldiers, "I am." "I am" is more than just an identifier. Through His response, Jesus opens the door to His divine nature just a crack. When He says, "I AM," He is, in essence, revealing He is One with His Father and, therefore, divine. Jesus' revelation to them knocks the company of soldiers and some officials back and down to the ground. So, do you think Jesus never had control of the situation? However, Peter thinks so. He draws His sword and cuts off the High Priest's servant's ear (18:10). In Luke's Gospel, Jesus takes the time to heal the servant's ear (Luke 22:51), which is a fun aside because now the High Priest, Caiaphas, has a living testimony to Jesus power in his home from then on.

First, the authorities bring Jesus to the former High Priest, Annas, Caiaphas' father-in-law, and again, John digs at the corrupt priesthood. "Caiaphas, who was high priest *that year*" (18:13, italics author).

As for the disciples, Peter hangs around outside, but another disciple, the one Jesus loved (John, 20:2; 13:23), enters the High Priest's courtyard because "That disciple was an acquaintance of the high priest" (18:15). That disciple speaks to the doorkeeper and brings Peter closer to witness the proceedings from the courtyard, standing near a charcoal fire. When questioned about being Jesus' disciple, Peter makes his first denial (18:17).

On the other hand, Jesus makes no denial to Annas, and he freely affirms His teaching and asks the former High Priest to question anybody who has heard Him. A nearby official slaps Jesus for daring to answer Annas, giving us a glimpse at the injustice in motion.

As Jesus is led away to Caiaphas for trial, Peter is confronted two more times about His affiliation with Jesus, denying it both times, thus fulfilling Jesus' words.

John jumps over Jesus' appearance before High Priest Caiaphas and moves immediately to His trial before Pilate. What's interesting is John gives us the time of day (early morning, 18:28) and reveals the Jewish leaders' refusal to enter Pilate's headquarters lest they be "defiled" and ineligible to partake in the Passover due to no time to cleanse themselves. As I read this, I get incensed because their injustice and desire to kill an innocent man have already defiled them, making them ineligible. Again, I see John pointing out a subtlety to dig at the corrupt leaders.

Pilate asks what crime Jesus committed, and the leaders respond, "He's a criminal, and that's why we brought Him to you." The implication here is Jesus is a criminal worthy of Roman execution. But Pilate throws it back at them – "You deal with it according to Jewish law." And then their true intent comes out into the open. "We want this man executed, and we aren't allowed to do it." This response leads Pilate to conclude the leaders had turned over another Messiah-wannabe insurrectionist. This kind usually pops up in Jerusalem during Passover because of the large crowds stoked by messianic fervor.

Unconvinced and frankly disinterested in Jewish affairs, Pilate asks Jesus if He thinks He's the Jewish king. If so, yes, that would threaten Rome and Judea's peace. Jesus asks Pilate if that's what he believes or if the governor is saying that because the leaders said so. Pilate snarkily replies, "What? Do I look like a Jew? They handed you over to me. What warranted that?" Jesus' reply is fascinating. He confirms to Pilate that He is a king with a kingdom, but it's not on earth. The fact that He has no followers defending Him proves it. Now *that* gets Pilate's attention. "You are a king then?" he asks. Jesus replies, "Those are your words, but that's the truth." Still unconvinced, Pilate "glibly dismissed the relevance of truth in the presence of the One who *is* truth incarnate. Pilate's comment may reflect disillusionment, if not bitterness, and a pragmatic viewpoint" (Study Bible commentary). Pilate's disregard for truth opens the door for him to violate justice (equal in value to the truth, for truth and justice must go together) and eventually execute an innocent man.

Chapter 18 ends with Pilate's compromise – either the unassuming and formerly-popular miracle-working rabbi or a well-known murderous true insurrectionist. As usual, the crowd chooses poorly.

INSIGHT

Persecution is inevitable, according to Jesus. If we're living for Him, we should expect to experience various forms of persecution as we "bump up against the world," especially when it comes to institutions such as Education, Government, Arts and Entertainment, and Business which are thoroughly worldly-oriented. Sadly, persecution can come from the last two institutions, Family and Religion, when the world system takes hold of them.

But persecution isn't all bad. Sounds masochistic, right? But persecution is valuable because it strengthens our convictions, solidifies our commitment to the Lord, and allows us to love as Jesus does. While the world uses persecution to squash God's kingdom, it works just the opposite. Jesus' church grows in numbers and intensity as persecution increases. Billy Graham said, "Persecution is one of the natural consequences of living

the Christian life. It is to the Christian what 'growing pains' are to the growing child. No pain, no development. No suffering, no glory. No struggle, no victory. No persecution, no reward."

The next time you feel "picked on" by the world, take the time to visit the *Voice of the Martyrs* website (persecution.com). You'll be inspired and challenged by the real-time accounts of persecution at levels most of us can only imagine. If it happens to us, we can reflect on another thing Billy Graham said, "We can take persecution because we know the purpose behind it. The purpose is to glorify God."

November 9 : Scriptures John 19-21

SUMMARY

Today, we reach the end of the Gospels. Pilate begins the sentencing phase of Jesus' trial by having Jesus flogged. Flogging was a horrible punishment because the Roman *flagella* was a multi-thronged whip with bone or metal attached to the ends. Each stroke would deeply lacerate the prisoner's flesh resulting in extreme blood loss and laying open the back's skin and muscles down to the bone. Flogging's purpose was to weaken the condemned prisoner through blood loss and trauma. It was also a way to amplify the torture of crucifixion as the crucified prisoner raised and lowered themselves on the cross for relief. Each movement brought excruciating pain as the wood cross raked the flayed back.

It's possible that Pilate flogged Jesus not only to make an example of Him but also to appeal to the crowds' sympathy when he brought Jesus out and shouted, "Behold, the man!" (19:5). Despite Pilate's declaration that he found the tortured and blood-soaked Jesus innocent, the leaders and their whipped-up mob demanded Jesus' crucifixion. Hey, what's a little brutal and unjust entertainment on a holy-day, right?

Again, trying to avoid Roman intervention, Pilate tells the crowd to kill Jesus themselves (19:6) because he finds no reason under Roman law to do so. The leaders intimidate Pilate by saying he better play his part because Jesus had declared Himself the Son of Man, a clear reference to Israel's Messiah King. That accusation and the rising tenor of the crowd causes Pilate to become more fearful of a riot breaking out, so he again goes to Jesus for confirmation. "Yes, you say you're a king. From where?" (19:9), Pilate asks, but Jesus remains silent. Perhaps Jesus doesn't know He still has a chance, and Pilate offers it to Him. "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you know that I have the authority to release you and the authority to crucify you?" (19:10). Despite that, Jesus tells Pilate he has no authority to release Him. That call is out of his hands and in God's.

Still unconvinced of Jesus' guilt, Pilate pleads with the crowd until they throw the big threat. "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Anyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar!" (19:12). The phrase Caesar's Friend is a "semi-formal status indicating a person favored by the emperor" (Study Bible). Emperor Tiberius had appointed Pilate as governor (prefect) of Judea in A.D. 26, and Pilate ruled for ten years. He knew the leaders could squeal on him to Rome, and news of Pilate not handling an uprising would cause his recall, if not punishment. To lose the title "Caesar's Friend" was bad enough. To give a pass to a Jew who opposed Caesar would bring severe consequences.

That was it. Pilate had no other options. It was either the choice to crucify a man he believed was innocent or face a massive uprising in Jerusalem during Passover with over a million people in the city. In Caiaphas' words, "one man should die for the people rather than the whole nation perish" (11:50). Pilate takes his judgment seat and presents Israel's king to the people, who immediately reject Jesus (19:14-15).

Side note: John says this happened on Preparation Day for the Passover, Thursday. Why does he differ from the Synoptics? Since everybody would remember on what day Jesus was crucified, scholars speculate that John adjusted the timeline to align Jesus with the Passover lambs' killings and preparations for the celebration, thus even more firmly equating Jesus as God's fulfillment of the Passover Lamb that frees God's people from the kingdom of darkness and protects them from the angel of death.

Jesus is taken away as crucified between two criminals. John notes the soldiers gamble to see which of them gets the robe Jesus wore (19:23). Cloth could be repurposed, so there was value to it. However, it was a more valuable garment because it was woven without a seam, and the soldiers didn't want to ruin it by tearing and sharing. Besides, a little gambling could while away the hours until the condemned "King of the Jews" died. John notes a prophetic fulfillment of Psalm 22:18.

John also notes Jesus making provision for his mother, Mary's, future needs by placing her under the Apostle John's care (19:25-27).

Now that all is wrapped up, and all prophecy regarding Jesus' death is fulfilled, Jesus breathes His last breath and says, "It's finished." The Lamb of God has taken the world's sin and triumphed.

It's 3 pm, and according to John, Passover will begin in a few hours. John again specifies the day that Jesus died as Preparation Day before the *holiday* Sabbath, not the *weekly* Sabbath as the Synoptics do (19:31). The leaders who had just condemned an innocent man to death now want the bodies taken down before Passover starts per the Torah's command. To hasten death, soldiers would break a crucified person's legs so they could no longer raise themselves to take the strain off their lungs and heart. Death would quickly follow. The soldiers did so to the two criminals, but Jesus had already died. Just to make sure, one of the Roman soldiers speared Jesus' chest to puncture His heart (19:34). Water and blood poured out, which John had already alluded to in 7:37-39, the sacrifice that releases living water – Jesus' death which would release the Holy Spirit to save people and fill them.

Two Sanhedrin members who were secret disciples of Jesus received Jesus' body for burial, wrapped it in spices, and placed it in a newly cut tomb (19:40-42).

Chapter 20: Jesus' Resurrection, Sunday morning. John's account has different details than the Synoptics. Mary is alone and sees the stone rolled away from the tomb, and she runs to tell Peter. Peter and John (the one Jesus loved) sprint to the site and look inside. Gospel writer John tells us he won the footrace to the tomb but refused to go in, likely in deference to Peter. As Peter was coming, John bent down and looked ("to have the faculty of sight; to see") into the tomb. When Peter arrives, he enters the tomb and sees ("to behold, view with interest and attention") the graveclothes arranged in such a way that graverobbers wouldn't have done. They would have had to unwrap the body, and the linens would be scattered around. Then John enters the tomb and sees ("to see, perceive, attend to") the situation, which causes John to believe what he sees, although he doesn't understand from scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. Furthermore, with Peter and John present, there are enough witnesses to legally establish the truth of what happened in a Jewish court. Peter and John return to where they are staying.

However, Mary of Magdala remains behind, grieving for Jesus and not understanding what has happened. She stoops to look again into the tomb, and two angels greet her and ask why she's crying. No doubt taken aback, Mary turns to get away from the two beings who had suddenly appeared and comes face to face with Jesus. His bodily form must have been so different from what she had last seen at Jesus' death that He was unrecognizable. Only when He speaks to her does Mary realize who the "gardener" is.

As she exclaims, "Rabboni, my Teacher," Jesus waves her off and says, "Don't cling to (touch, lay hold of) me, since I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (20:17). So Mary runs off to tell the disciples.

That evening, Jesus walks into a room, although the doors are locked (20:19). Evidently, the glorified body can suspend physical laws. Yet, Jesus still has wounds from His crucifixion as proof of His death and resurrection. Since He has completed His work, Jesus breathes on His disciples in John's version of the Great Commission that we read in Matthew 28. The One sent from the Father now sends His disciples with the assurance of the Holy Spirit's coming that will be needed to fulfill their commission. This event isn't their "salvation" moment because salvation under the New Covenant can only be accomplished through the Holy Spirit, who won't arrive until the Day of Pentecost. Jesus is commissioning them in a way that shows all three Persons of the Godhead are involved in the sending and equipping process.

But one person wasn't present, Thomas. The disciples tell him Jesus has risen from the dead, but Thomas doesn't believe them. Only when Jesus shows up (again walking through locked doors) and tells Thomas to touch Him does Thomas believe the resurrection has occurred. All the disciples encounter a new state of human existence – the glorified body – that will be supernaturally physical. Since the Father plans to restore humanity to how we were designed, is it reasonable to assume Jesus' glorified body was the way Adam and Eve were before the Fall? Something to ponder.

John finishes chapter 20 with the Gospel and why he wrote down his account of Jesus' ministry. "Jesus said, "Because you have seen me, you have believed. (*The Gospel*) *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*" Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. (*John's purpose*) *But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name"* (20:29-31, italics author).

And with chapter 21, we complete our *Cruisin' Through the Bible*, Gospel edition. According to Jesus, the disciples are supposed to leave Jerusalem and go home to Galilee. So, what do you do as a disciple when you're waiting for Jesus? Go fishing (21:3)! Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two other disciples hop into a boat and head out, but the fishing is lousy. They don't catch a thing all night except maybe a few bug bites and a little shut-eye.

In the morning, Jesus has some fun with His guys. He asks them if they've caught any fish. (Right. As if He didn't know.) When they reply that they haven't, Jesus suggests that maybe the fish are hanging out on the other side of the boat. You know, like they do. Perhaps the person on the shore can see the water rippling with fish that the fishermen/disciples can't see. So, they cast their nets and capture so many fish the net nearly breaks with the weight.

Funny, it's not Peter who identifies Jesus. It's John (21:7). Have you noticed that in John's Gospel, he puts himself in a better light than Peter, the leader? "The one Jesus loved/John reaches the tomb before Peter/Peter sees the burial clothes, but John understands the meaning and believes" and so on. I just thought I'd point that out.

Impetuous Peter doesn't wait to haul in the fish, and he jumps into the water to swim to Jesus, waiting on the shore for the guys. When they all arrive, Jesus has a *charcoal* fire to cook up some fish for breakfast.

Why is it important for John to note it was a charcoal fire rather than a wood fire? Tom Brimmer, an Israeli guide and husband of Bridges For Peace's International President, Rebecca Brimmer, made an excellent point about this detail. Sense memory is a powerful thing. Isn't it amazing that you can hear a song from a long time ago and instantly find yourself back in memory of past times, even the precise moment? Or a smell takes us back to a far-distant childhood memory. Tell me, what does a charcoal fire smell like? If you've ever grilled outdoors, you know that smell immediately. It smells completely different than a wood fire, right?

The last time John noted a charcoal fire in his Gospel was when Peter was warming himself in the High Priest's courtyard, *just before he denied Jesus three times*. Do you think it's a coincidence that Jesus had a charcoal fire burning when Peter walked onto the shore and up to His Lord, whom he had denied? The smell would take Peter back to that shameful moment, and sitting down with Jesus, Peter and Jesus were about to have a chat.

Peter denied Jesus three times. Now Jesus lets Peter confess his love for Jesus three times as the Lord reinstates him as the disciples' leader. After Peter confesses his love, Jesus reveals that Peter will indeed love Him to death. For his commitment to Jesus, Peter will die by crucifixion (21:18-19). According to Christian tradition, Peter was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die as His Lord and Messiah did.

Isn't it weird that we get concerned about what the Lord will do with other people? "Yeah, I get what you're saying about me, Jesus. But what about him? What are you going to do with him?" Jesus' response to Peter's question about John's demise (implied because Jesus had just prophesied about Peter's death)? "Pay attention to yourself. My plan for him is different than My plan for you." Maybe there was a little competition between Peter and John going on here? Jesus' word to Peter applies to all of us. Let's not be concerned about what He plans for "the other person." Let's just commit to being faithful and completing the work Jesus has for us to do as Jesus completed His Father's work.

That said, Jesus' reply was misinterpreted. Some thought Jesus wanted John to live until He returned. This idea was understandable during the early years of the messianic community because many believed Jesus would return soon after His departure. Little did they know Jesus' people would still be working on global evangelism for almost 2,000 (or more?) years.

John closes his Gospel by testifying as accurate all that he wrote. Since others also experienced the same things John did, his testimony is verified as legally valid. He also lets us know that he didn't even dare to write down all that Jesus did as there was too much material (21:25). What he did curate was enough to bear witness to Jesus "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

INSIGHT

Details are fascinating. In John's resurrection account, Jesus tells Mary not to touch Him because "since I have not yet ascended to the Father." Jesus' warning may not mean anything to the casual reader, especially if they're unfamiliar with the priesthood, the Temple service, and the Feasts of the Lord. But John, who was "known to the high priest" and structured his Gospel around the Feasts of the Lord and their themes, likely found Jesus' words astounding and essential to write down.

Jesus' words reflect the High Priest offering the bull and goat blood on the Day of Atonement. On that highly sacred day, the High Priest would have to endure an extensive and thorough purification process to make it possible for him to present the blood of atonement before God's presence in the Holy of Holies. In his purified state, the High Priest would receive a bowl containing the atoning blood and carry it into the Temple and behind the curtain. In God's presence, he would sprinkle some of the blood before God and upon the Ark of the Covenant's lid, the Mercy Seat, to atone for Israel's sins (Leviticus 16:14-15). If any person touched the High Priest at any point during the Day of Atonement service, he would become defiled and would have to start over after being purified again. Therefore, he would warn all others to stay away from Him as He performed his sacred duty.

It's conjecture on my part, but I believe that Jesus completed His High Priestly work on His resurrection day by presenting Himself to His Father as the atoning sacrifice that sealed atonement for sins into the New Covenant. I believe it was that day since, later in the evening, Jesus invited His disciples to touch Him physically. When I get to heaven, I'll ask Jesus about this.

November 10 : Scriptures Acts 1-3

SUMMARY

We've been *Cruisin' Through the Bible* and reached the book of Acts. Well, actually, the Acts of the Apostles because it covers the first ~30 years of the Early Messianic Community, and I call it that rather than "church" because the first believers were nearly all Jewish. It's not until we reach chapter 10 that the first Gentiles enter the Good Shepherd's fold. Then the Early community has to figure out what to do with all these Gentiles who are converting to a messianic stream of Judaism nicknamed The Way. Over time, the community became more Gentilized, and words were substituted. What was the *qahal* (Hebrew) or assembly of believers who attended synagogues and met in homes became the *ekklesia* (Greek), the called-out ones who later adopted non-Jewish forms of worship.

We stand on the cusp of the New Covenant's start with Jesus's ascension back to His Father to begin His work of intercession for His people () and to send the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's arrival signals the launch of the New Covenant and God's kingdom inside Jesus' born-again disciples. Where God's kingdom is, His will is followed, and His power is at work. Both of these we see in the New Covenant community. Nothing like this ever happened in the Jewish community *except* when they first became a nation at Mount Sinai, but you'll have to read the Insight below for that little tidbit.

Acts focuses on the critical roles fulfilled by Peter, Paul, and other disciples who helped shape the growing New Covenant community, beginning in Jerusalem and spreading throughout the Roman empire. Who is the writer? Best scholarship says it was Luke as a continuation of Luke's Gospel. Compare the two openings:

Luke's Gospel: "Many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed them down to us. So it also seemed good to me, since I have carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you in an orderly sequence, most honorable *Theophilus*, so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed" (Luke 1:1-4)

Book of Acts: "I wrote the first narrative, *Theophilus*, about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:1-3). In both openings, we see the purpose

is very similar. Theophilus is the recipient of both writings. Along with the change from third to first person style (16:10, the “we” section of Acts), these three are solid arguments for “Lukan authorship,” as the scholars put it.

We begin with Jesus’ departure and promise to return, followed by the Holy Spirit’s arrival and the messianic community’s growth. Then we read about the New Covenant opened for Gentiles, Apostle Paul’s conversion and call, his missionary outreaches to spread the Gospel in Asia Minor, and his arrest/imprisonment in Rome. Let’s get *cruisin’!*

In chapter 1, Luke begins with his introduction, as mentioned above, noting Jesus’ death and bodily resurrection, demonstrated “by many convincing proofs.” Luke tells us the time between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to heaven was forty days. This note is important because according to the Feasts of the Lord cycle, a day count starts on the Feast of First Fruits and continues for fifty days, seven weeks plus one day, per the Torah (Leviticus 23:16). The 50th day is the Feast of Shavuot (meaning “weeks” after the seven elapsed weeks). Here’s how the Spring Feasts are scheduled:

Unleavened Bread – First month, days 15th to the 21st.

Passover – First month, 15th.

First Fruits – First month, the day after the Sabbath, during Unleavened Bread week. (A fifty-day count begins)

Shavuot/Weeks – Third month, 50 days post-First Fruits.

Agriculturally speaking, First Fruits is when the Israelites brought the first cuttings of the first crop (barley) to the Lord as a thank offering. Shavuot is also a first fruits-type celebration when the Israelites brought the first cuttings of the wheat harvest to the Lord, again as a thank offering.

Historically speaking, the Israelites left Egypt on the day of Passover and crossed the Red Sea, emerging on the other side at dawn on the soon-to-be-designated Feast of First Fruits. The Israelites then traveled for 47 days to Mount Sinai and met the Lord on the 50th day to become His kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Jesus fulfilled the Spring Feasts to the day. He is the “Unleavened Bread” (sinless), our Passover Lamb (Jesus died on Passover), the First Fruits of the dead (the first human with a resurrected body), and created a New Covenant kingdom of priests and a holy nation on Shavuot fifty days later.

See? God has a plan, and He's already unrolled it. Food for thought: If Jesus fulfilled the Spring Feasts to the day, will He do the same with the Fall Feasts of the Lord in His return? Just putting that out there.

Back to Acts. Luke starts during the 50-day count as Jesus gives His disciples instructions about what to do after He departs to return to His Father (1:4). He tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit that His Father promised. This instruction is subtle. Jesus promised during the Last Passover to send the Holy Spirit after He had completed His salvation work on the cross. However, by using the term "the Father's promise," He's referring to the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit as part of the New Covenant's launch (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:25-28). John immersed people in the water for repentance to prepare them to meet their God. Jesus will immerse His people in the Holy Spirit (Living Water) *to make them His people* (1:5).

Jesus' instruction leads immediately to a vital question from His disciples, "Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?" (1:6). Why? Because the Older Covenant prophets equated the "outpouring" of God's Spirit with God's kingdom appearing (Mount Sinai, Numbers 11:16-30; End Times, Joel 2:28-32). When Jesus talked about the Holy Spirit's arrival, the disciples thought that Jesus would return soon after the Spirit's coming to fulfill the Father's promise of a global kingdom of God with Israel at the head of the nations.

Yes, that's the ultimate goal, but not at that time, and Jesus tells them that. It's not for them to know when God's kingdom will become a geo-political entity with Jesus' return. Their immediate responsibility is to receive the Holy Spirit and get to the work of making "disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" and bearing witness about Jesus. "And remember, I am with you always (via the Holy Spirit), to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

That said, Jesus rises to heaven, surrounded by clouds. Even stranger things happen as the disciples pick their jaws up from the ground. Two angels appear and inform them that Jesus will return the same way He left (1:11). This was no idle statement. Do you remember Daniel's "Son of Man" vision (Daniel 7:13) and Jesus' description of returning with the clouds (Matthew 24:30; Mark 13:26)? *The Son of Man returning with clouds is a specific reference to the End and the moment Jesus returns, and it's crucial to know that when trying to figure out End Times events.*

The core group of about 120 men and women disciples returns to Jerusalem to pray for ten days (1:12-15). During that time, they knew they needed to find someone to fill Judas' place, for he had killed himself out of remorse for betraying Jesus (1:18-20; Matthew 27:3). Matthias is chosen by lot and installed as the twelfth disciple.

In chapter 2, Shavuot ("Weeks"), the day of Pentecost ("50th"), arrives, and so does the Holy Spirit, bringing with Him the start of God's kingdom on earth. The disciples were gathered in one place (1:2) – the Temple courts. How do we know that? 1) 120 people are too many to fit in an average residence, 2) many people ran to see what was taking place, and Jerusalem's streets are too narrow, and 3) many people see the supernatural manifestations which could only happen in a prominent place with a lot of Jews gathered to worship. Remember, Shavuot was the second of three mandatory pilgrim Feasts of the Lord. A lot of Jews from many nations would have made the trip. Gee, just what the Lord needs to "spread the word" – a ready-made audience of hundreds of thousands of Jews to watch His kingdom come to earth in peoples' hearts!

The Holy Spirit arrives with a violent roar of wind and tongues of fire that come to rest on each disciple (2:3). The disciples speak in tongues, declaring the Lord's praises (2:4). Why did God give them the gift of tongues? So God could get the attention of the Jews who were visiting Jerusalem from all over the Roman empire, and so they could hear about Jesus firsthand (2:5-12). It was such a raucous event some even accused the 120 disciples of being drunk (2:13).

Not so, says Peter, and the one who had denied his Lord stood up to address the massive Temple crowd (2:14). Peter tells the public exactly what's happening – it's the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that God promised in Joel 2. God's Last Days kingdom has come (2:17)! Many Christians say they're waiting until the Last Days leading up to Jesus' return and often equate "End Times" with the term "Last Days." Let me clear this up. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter declares the Last Days have begun. Therefore, they've been going on for almost 2,000 years. What we're all waiting for is the End Time of the Last Days. Got it? Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit's activity during the Last Days is ongoing – prophesying, dreams, visions, wonders, and people entering God's kingdom through salvation (2:16-21).

Speaking of salvation, Peter moves immediately to bear witness to Jesus as the Jews' only way to enter God's New Covenant kingdom. Yes, the Jews are still God's people by Abrahamic lineage, but to be God's child (eternal life through spiritual rebirth), each person must make their appeal to God based on what Jesus did. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, but it's much more than an earthly kingdom. It's about God's kingdom in

heaven and on earth. Although Jesus was crucified and died, Peter testifies to Jesus' resurrection in line with God's Word (Psalm 16:8–11). David speaks of the Father not letting His Holy One see decay. This quote speaks not only of Jesus' resurrection but of it happening on the 3rd day before bodily decay set in (compare Jesus, 3rd day, vs. Lazarus, who stinketh, 4th day).

Peter states that King David wasn't talking about himself but prophesying about his descendant, the Messiah, to come (2:29-31). Peter and the gang can attest to this because they saw Jesus alive after His death and watched Him ascend to heaven to be at His Father's side and send the Holy Spirit as the seal of God's kingdom within people (2:32-33). David didn't ascend into heaven, but Jesus did (2:34).

Then Peter drops the bomb, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (2:36). The Messiah lives as Israel's Lord forever!

Then the Holy Spirit goes to work. Jesus said that when He comes, the Holy Spirit would "convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:8). The people are pierced in their hearts with conviction for their part in killing Jesus, their sin before God, and their need for salvation with forgiveness and cleansing (2:37). Peter gives the first altar call in the history of the church, and about 3,000 Jews are saved!

So how did the early messianic Jewish community function? Exactly like Jesus wanted them to. They made disciples of the Jews from the nations and fellowshiped, ate, and prayed together. The disciples and those who remained in Jerusalem used their means to support the newly-born community of believers. Here's an important point: they continued to worship at the Temple. Many Christians say God did away with Temple worship and the Law. And yet, throughout the book of Acts, we see Jewish believers continue to worship at the Temple and live their lives according to the Torah. Think about that for a while. What might that mean for Gentile Christians? Hold that thought until Acts 15.

You know, there's nothing like a good miracle to promote the glory of God and His kingdom. Chapter 3 opens during a time not long after the Shavuot events. Peter and John are heading up to the Temple for prayer time at the close of the day's sacrificial service, 3 pm. As they head up the stairs toward the Beautiful Gate, they see a lame man whose friends have placed them there to ask alms of the worshipers.

There was no welfare system; if people didn't give, many infirm people would be destitute. The Torah commanded helping the poor so that there would be no poor among

them. As for helping the poor, one of the Torah's principles was to give to "get the poor person on their feet" again as a productive member of society (Deuteronomy 15:7-15). Even if the poor person contracted his services as an indentured servant, the debt holder was to work toward his servant's release in the 7th year, if not earlier.

When Peter and John see the impoverished lame man, the Spirit of the Torah begins to move. The lame man asks them for money, but Peter and John have something far more significant in their Spirit-inspired minds than just a few coins. By the authority and power of Jesus, Peter commands the lame man to get up and walk. Immediately, the man is set free from his infirmity and can "get on his feet" once again! What a beautiful fulfillment of the spirit of the Torah at the Beautiful Gate!

Peter uses what Jesus has done through him as a prime opportunity to hold an evangelistic service in the Temple (3:12). Peter takes no credit but gives it all to the God of their ancestors and glorifies Jesus as the source of the man's healing.

Before we can preach the Good News, the bad news of sin must be pointed out, sometimes rather boldly. Peter hits the crowd of Jews squarely in the proverbial face. "*You* handed Jesus over to Pilate, *you* denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be released, and *you* killed the source of life. *But* God raised the source of life back to life, and we are eyewitnesses. It's faith in Jesus that healed this man!" (3:13-16).

Though they acted in ignorance, God planned to work out humanity's salvation in their way through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. The Messiah was supposed to suffer (Isaiah 53). The only appropriate response by Peter's audience is to turn back to God to receive forgiveness and cleansing.

When Peter talks about the restoration of all things, this means the time when God acts to return the earth to its original perfect condition at creation. However, when we listen to Peter, we understand the early believers believed this would happen not long after Jesus left. Further, when Jesus returned as the resurrected and glorified "prophet like unto Moses," they would be held to account for their obedience or disobedience (3:22). However, Peter understands that salvation is not just for the Jews but for "all the families of the earth." The Jews get it offered to them first, which becomes the theme throughout Acts. The Gospel starts with the Jews in Jerusalem and will eventually launch out into the Gentile world by God's command and the Spirit's direction and empowerment.

INSIGHT

Pictures and patterns. We understand scriptures written later when we read and understand the earlier ones, and it's called progressive revelation. God revealed things in ancient history and gradually unfolded the meaning over time. To understand what happened at Pentecost (Shavuot in Jesus' day, the 50th day after First Fruits), we need to go back to the first "50th day" about 1,500 years earlier when the newly-freed Israelites stood at the base of Mount Sinai. God had just freed them from a dark kingdom, and 50 days later, at Mount Sinai, He began His kingdom on earth through His people. If we compare the two events, we see striking similarities:

Element	Mount Sinai	Temple Mount
God's covenant people all in one place.	Shavuot (Hebrew)	Pentecost (Greek)
A Covenant between a King and His servants.	Yehovah and His Subjects.	Jesus and His followers.
A Marriage between a husband and a wife.	Yehovah and Israel.	Jesus and all believers.
Audible Manifestations.	Sound of a roaring furnace.	Sound of a mighty rushing wind.
Visible Manifestations.	Fire and smoke (Yehovah's physical presence).	Tongues of Fire (the Holy Spirit's presence).
God's presence.	External, resting on the mountain.	Internal, resting on and in the believer.
God revealed Himself.	Through the imparting of the Torah.	Through the implanting of the Torah.
The Torah.	Written on stone, fights with a corrupt human nature, requires human strength to	Written on hearts, works alongside our new nature, Holy Spirit-empowered

	obey, and taught by external rabbis.	obedience, and taught by an "internal" resident Rabbi.
A FirstFruits offering for God.	Israel is the <i>model</i> of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation before the Lord.	The body of believers is the <i>fulfillment</i> of God's kingdom of priests and a holy nation before the Lord.

The events at Mount Sinai were a picture that was fulfilled at Pentecost in Jesus' day. As Israel was meant to be a light unto the nations, showing God's glory to the people who passed by Israel along the trade routes, Jesus' people are to be the light of the world, taking the light of God's revelation to the nations.

It's the difference between a streetlight and candles that share light. A streetlight's glow reaches only so far. But candles can spread light to the darkest, most distant areas.

November 11 : Scriptures Acts 4-5

SUMMARY

As the saying goes, "No good deed goes unpunished." No sooner does the Holy Spirit do a miracle through Peter and John than the Temple authorities are notified and arrive to confront those out-of-control, miracle-working, Jesus-loving disturbers of the peace (4:1). Why are the authorities ticked off at Peter and John? Because they, along with the rest of the Spirit-filled believers, are spreading the news about Jesus' resurrection from the dead (4:2). So the authorities arrest Peter and John. Meanwhile, the Gospel is spreading like crazy!

The next day, the guys are hauled before the Sanhedrin and the heads of the Sadducean priestly families to give an account for their words and deeds. The leaders' inquest likely didn't surprise Peter and John because Jesus warned them this would happen, "Whenever they bring you before synagogues and rulers and authorities, don't worry about how you should defend yourselves or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what must be said" (Luke 12:11-12). And that's precisely what happens.

Peter tells the unvarnished truth. They've arrested them for doing a good deed. Jesus, "whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead," is by whose authority this was done. He fulfills Psalm 118:22 and therefore, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved" (4:12)
Mic drop

Here are a few things to ponder. First, you don't have to be a trained theologian, a pastor, or a "professional" minister to do what Jesus told you to do, even if it's speaking a powerful word or doing great works in Jesus' name (4:13). All you need is a relationship with Jesus, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, a basic knowledge of the Word, and obedience.

Second, it's tough for people to deny Jesus when the results are standing right in front of them (4:16). How Jesus has touched your life and the lives of others, be it a transformed life or a genuine miracle, is enough to squash most arguments and objections to Jesus. I once heard a pastor say, "The person with the experience is never at the mercy of the person with the argument." The Sanhedrin has nothing to say to Peter and John about Jesus' miracle walking around outside.

All that's left for the Sanhedrin is to order them "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (4:18). Yeah, right. Whether it's right for Peter and John to speak in Jesus' name is the Sanhedrin's problem, not theirs. The two disciples can't stop doing so. So, at this point, all the Sanhedrin can do is threaten Peter and John and let them go (4:21). How can they punish them when everybody knows what a magnificent miracle it was – the man had been infirmed for over forty years!

Is Jesus' community of followers intimidated? No way! They know God is "large and in charge," and what they've just experienced is in line with what the Lord prophesied through King David centuries earlier (4:24-26; Psalm 2:1-2 – a messianic psalm). The Gentile and Jewish leadership oppose God and His Messiah, Jesus, just as Psalm 2 says. So, should Jesus' community shrink back in fear? *No!* They ask for *more* boldness to speak and for *more* healing, signs, and wonders to occur. Again, it's hard for people to argue against what God does, and supernatural events add irrefutable proof to a Christian's testimony. God grants their request by pouring out even more of His presence, evidenced by the building shaking.

What a marvelous example of Jesus' community in action! Not only are supernatural incidents popping up to confirm that the disciples were preaching, but love and generosity flow as the believers freely give their possessions to support the community. One of those generous givers is Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus by birth, also called Barnabas, the "son of encouragement." Barnabas becomes a key player in the book of Acts.

Again, chapter headings sometimes get in the way of the narrative, as we see with the transition from chapters 4 to 5. The topic is people selling their material goods and freely giving all for the work of the fledgling messianic Jewish movement in Jerusalem. Two scammers, Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, come up with the idea to "sell" their property, keep back some of the proceeds, and give the rest to the community as if they had given it all. Theirs was a simple fraud case, and they made a fraudulent claim, a lie. But while they thought they were lying to the apostles, they were actually lying to God.

Now, some believe the God of the New Covenant (Jesus) is the God of love, while the God of the Older Covenant (Yehovah) is the God of judgment. Nope. They are the same, and "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrew 13:8). Lying is a sin and one that the "New Covenant" Jesus chose to judge at that moment. The Spirit didn't strike Ananias and Sapphira down because they didn't give all they had to Jesus' community. They could have kept some of the proceeds back for their use, which would have been fine. They died because they lied to God. Could it have been that sin was

judged more harshly in the rarified holy atmosphere of the New Covenant community, which was awash with God's presence? Notice God didn't do this to unbelievers, but to believers. What might that say to the state of most churches today? Some Christians live in gross sin in many congregations, yet nothing happens. Either God has grown to tolerate sin against Him, or He isn't in our communities.

When God's presence bursts upon the scene in revivals, the first thing that usually happens is a long period of deep grief over personal sin, followed by repentance and changed lives. Could the reverse be said that when God's presence is not manifest or absent due to neglect, indifference, or stubborn rebellion against His word, sin spreads, and wicked actions increase? I'm convinced of this. Are any congregations willing to pay the cost and take the risk to invite the Holy Spirit and His manifest presence as fully as He wants to bring it? If God started striking bold-faced unrepentant, and rebellious Christians down, there would be more fear of God in our churches and a lot more respect for God's people in the world. That's what happens after Ananias and Sapphira are buried (5:11).

Along with the fear of God come the signs, miracles, and wonders of God (5:12-16). If the Sanhedrin thought they had a problem with the newborn messianic community after one man was healed, they have a huge one now with multitudes being healed and set free from demons (5:12, 16). And because of the miracle-confirmed testimonies and preaching, masses of Jews were coming to trust Jesus and join the community of believers. Something must be done! My study Bible says this, "The high priest and his colleagues opposed the spread of Christianity not merely because they didn't believe in Jesus as Messiah, but because they were filled with jealousy at the following that was building around Him daily as the apostles preached and performed miracles."

The leaders can't deny that Jesus' apostles are performing genuine miracles. However, the Torah says that any prophet who performs a miracle and then encourages people to turn from God is a false prophet and should be killed (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). This preventative measure is what the leaders from the Sanhedrin tried to do to Jesus and eventually succeeded through the crucifixion with Roman help. Now they see Jesus' followers doing the same thing and using those miracles to reinforce their claim that God has raised the blaspheming false prophet, Jesus, from the dead and that the people should turn to Him as Messiah. They had tried to nip the burgeoning movement in the bud by threatening Peter and John, and now this was getting out of hand.

They arrest the apostles, but God stages a jailbreak (5:18-21). But rather than run and hide, the disciples obey the angel of the Lord and go back to their evangelistic healing services

in the Temple courts. After the Sanhedrin is informed the apostles have gone back to preaching in the Temple precincts, they send the Temple guard to bring 'em in for another hearing. This time, it's without force because the apostles had so much favor with the people (5:26).

The Sanhedrin leaders complain that the apostles have continued teaching about Jesus being raised from the dead and, by implication, making them guilty of Jesus' death. Duh! They were, as Peter responds, which really put pressure on the Sanhedrin. Furthermore, the Sanhedrin isn't the boss of them. God is, and they must obey Jesus about what they've experienced rather than human authorities (5:29, 32).

Well, that response creates a firestorm! The Sanhedrin erupts, and many leaders vociferously demand the apostles be killed. However, the voice of reason speaks. Gamaliel (Gamaliel I) was a highly-respected leader at the time and the apostle Paul's teacher (22:3). He calls for the apostles to be removed and addresses the Sanhedrin about past incidents involving Messiah wannabes. Theudas and Judas were killed, and it wasn't long until their followers faded away. The situation with Jesus is the same. He's dead, and it will likely take some time for the enthusiasm to die as well, especially after the tension and excitement of the recent Spring Feasts of Passover and Shavuot. Gamaliel's advice is to let it all play out because if this movement is human in origin, it'll fade. Such things always do. However (and this is a wise consideration by Gamaliel), if the Jesus movement is of God, then the Sanhedrin won't be able to stop it and will wind up fighting against God (5:35-39). Big mistake!

The Sanhedrin decides to follow Gamaliel's advice. They flog the disciples (a step up from last time's verbal warning) and send them out. The apostles rejoice that they share in Jesus' sufferings because they effectively mirror their master (5:41). Rather than following the cease and desist order, the apostles continue their work.

INSIGHT

Over the years, I've encountered people who want more opportunities in the church, especially more responsibilities and recognition, and I've told them the best way to get a start is to give and serve. That's exactly how I got my start.

I began as an acolyte (an altar boy) in the Lutheran church. I showed up every Sunday to light the candles, help serve Communion, lead the processions, and assist as required. When I reached Junior High, I participated and served in the Youth Group, which went on into college. After college, I was married, and God called me to a Lay Ministry Training Center where I began learning the Bible earnestly and served as a worship leader

and television ministry volunteer. Then I took a job in Christian television, followed by a position as a church Music Director. When God's call came, I entered pastoral training and quickly entered full-time ministry, where I led worship, taught college-age classes, preached, and cleaned bathrooms as an Assistant Pastor.

After that, I was called to serve as an Associate Pastor, planted a congregation, became a Senior Pastor, then served as the director for a crisis pregnancy center, and finally, planted another congregation where I served as the pastor for eleven years.

Even though I'm not currently serving as a pastor, I produce materials for High Beam Ministry (thank you for using *Cruisin' Through The Bible!*), and I volunteer in a local congregation on the worship team. I also lead a small group, and I occasionally teach.

Why list all that? Because a lifetime of serving God began by being willing to serve and give of my time and skills, even if it was just lighting candles and carrying a processional cross. You don't need executive-level training for God to use you. Just make yourself available and improve yourself as you go. You'll be amazed at where God leads you. I can testify to that!

November 12 : Scriptures Acts 6-8

SUMMARY

Ah, growing pains! In chapter 6, the number of believers in the messianic community is growing, and so are the needs. There are plenty of provisions, as we read in 4:34 "For there was not a needy person among them because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed to each person as any had need."

As you can see, the apostles were the ones who headed up the food distribution at first. But now, the operation must expand. As it grew, some Hellenistic Jews complained about their widows being overlooked. The Hellenistic Jewish believers were Jews more heavily influenced by Greek culture than the local "Hebraic" Jews. Some think the difference could also be based on Diaspora vs. Judean Jews or whether those Jews spoke Greek or Hebrew as their primary language. Whatever the definition, one group felt they were being passed over in the daily distribution (6:1).

The solution? Select "from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty" (6:3). These kinds of servants were already part of 1st c. synagogue life. They were called *Gabbai Tzedakah*. "Historically, the *gabbai* was the title given to a person charged with collecting funds. The person who would collect and distribute *tzedakah* (charity) funds (the word *gabbai* actually means "collector") was known as a *gabbai tzedakah*" (chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4118810/jewish/The-Gabbai.htm). This role is what many churches today call *deacons* (from *diakonos* – "one who executes the commands of another." The king's servant. A waiter who serves a table of customers. A function of service within the local congregation).

The appointment of seven men as *gabbaim tzedakah* (*gah-bah-eem' tseh-dah'-kah*)/*deacons* was crucial to free up the apostles to more important matters such as prayer and teaching the new community what Jesus had taught them. Jesus' commission was to make disciples... teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you." That was the disciples'/apostles' primary job. The deacons were community assistants to serve the people. May I point out that the servant function isn't relegated to just anybody? Those who handled the community's resources and organized the distributions needed to be men of character and good reputation, *filled with the Spirit and wisdom*. *Gabbaim*/deacons need to be utterly trustworthy. Once selected, the apostles laid hands on them, commissioning them officially for their work.

And now we get a hint of more trouble on the horizon, “the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and *a large group of priests became obedient to the faith*” (6:7, italics author). Uh-oh. The Gospel is reaching the Temple priesthood itself and, therefore, also working its way into the Sadduceean aristocratic families. Things are about to get messy!

The first deacon chosen per the list was Stephen. Not only was he a faithful servant, but he also was “full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8), and where God’s presence and power act, human and spiritual opposition often, if not always, arises (6:9). In this case, the opposition came to Stephen from Diaspora Jews from the Freedmen’s Synagogue. These Jews’ background was Cyrene, Egypt’s city of Alexandria, Cilicia (the southern coast of today’s Turkey), and Asia (Asia Minor/Turkey).

These non-messianic Jews disputed with the local Jew, Stephen. They couldn’t win their arguments against Stephen because of the last two qualities needed for a deacon – the indwelling Holy Spirit and wisdom. To get back at Stephen, the losers created a grave false accusation against Stephen, that he was “speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God” (6:11). Grave is right because if convicted, that’s exactly where Stephen would end up, in a grave. Once again, mob justice kicks in, and Stephen is arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin for his blasphemy trial. And yet, Stephen is calm, glowing with God’s presence.

Chapter 7 opens with Stephen’s speech addressing the false charges against him. The accusations are 1) speaking against Moses and God and 2) that Jesus will destroy the Temple and change Moses’ law (referring to the messianic community’s belief in Jesus’ resurrection). To be accurate, Jesus *never* spoke against Moses and God. Jesus *predicted* the Temple’s destruction, and the other reference to a “temple” was about His body, not the actual Temple. However, natural minds naturally understood Jesus’ spiritual points and missed His metaphor. Finally, Jesus won’t change the customs of Moses, only those *called* the customs of Moses that the Jewish establishment has created that didn’t line up with the Torah. But when you’re hosting a kangaroo court, why quibble about details?

Regarding the charge of speaking against God and Moses, Stephen shows he didn’t by faithfully and accurately affirming God, God’s plan, God’s people, God’s man, and God’s law through Moses (7:2-38). Furthermore, by Stephen affirming Moses, he affirms God’s promise through Moses to bring forth a Prophet like Moses from among the Israelite/Jewish people (7:37). And as long as the court is on the subject of speaking

against Moses, the Israelites already had a long history of opposing Moses and speaking against God's prophet (7:39-43).

Regarding the charge about destroying God's Temple, Stephen affirmed God's intent to dwell among His people, whether in a tent, the Tabernacle, or a building, the Temple. However, Stephen quotes Isaiah, through whom God made clear that He doesn't live in buildings. Those edifices aren't for God; those buildings are for the people. Yes, God affirms the Temple, but it's not necessary (7:44-50).

Here is how I would paraphrase Stephen's speech: "You accuse me of opposing and resisting God and opposing Moses. *You* are the ones who oppose God and have killed Moses' spiritual successors, the prophets. Worse yet, you did both at the same time. You opposed Jesus (God in the flesh *and* the Prophet Moses promised). And doing away with Moses' Law, the Torah? *You* have no trouble doing away with Moses' law! So, when you accuse me, *you indict yourselves!*

When the Sanhedrin became incensed earlier with Peter and John, Gamaliel calmed the court and restrained them from executing the two disciples. No restraint is forthcoming now. When Stephen declares that he sees Jesus, the Son of Man, standing at God's right hand, he invokes Daniel 7, the Judgment Day. That's it. The Sanhedrin has heard enough. The remarkable deacon is hauled outside of the city. But rather than the Son of Man coming down to judge the earth, the Son of Man welcomes Stephen's spirit rising to meet Him (7:56-59). And who should be present at the first martyrdom of a Jesus-follower? None other than the accomplished Jewish Torah scholar and disciple of Rabbi Gamliel, Saul of Tarsus, aka the future believer, disciple, and apostle, *Paul* (7:58).

Saul wholeheartedly approves Stephen's execution for blasphemy (8:1), and great persecution against the new stream of Judaism breaks out within Jerusalem. But remember what was said about persecution? It's the fertilizer for growth and causes God's kingdom to increase, spread, and thrive. As Saul becomes the Sanhedrin's prosecutor, arresting believers wherever he can find them, most of the Jerusalem congregation members flee Jerusalem into Judea and north to Samaria.

Philip went to a town in Samaria (perhaps the one that responded strongly to the Gospel in John 4?) and preached the Gospel with accompanying signs. Since the Jews of Jerusalem despise the Samaritans, there is little risk that they would send Saul into Samaria to persecute the deceived messianic Jews. Let them stay in Samaria with those other heretics.

The narrative switches to Simon the Sorcerer, a man with demonstrable occult powers that had amazed the Samaritans for a long time, making himself out to be someone special. However, that changed when Philip came to town preaching about God's kingdom in Jesus' name. Many Samaritans converted to the new stream of Judaism, including Simon, who followed Philip and watched as the disciple performed more wondrous works than Simon had ever done. When the Jerusalem messianic leaders heard what was happening in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to check it out. Imagine that. With their mixed-up Judaism, the mixed-race Samaritans entered God's kingdom through Jesus and got straightened out!

They were saved, alright, but they hadn't received the Holy Spirit. Admittedly, this is a point of contention within Christianity today. Can one be saved without the Holy Spirit's work and residency within a person? No. That's the essence of the New Covenant – salvation with the indwelling Holy Spirit.

So, are the Samaritans saved? If yes, then the Holy Spirit that needed to be imparted to them must have been for power reasons – called the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. However, the text says, “so that the Samaritans might receive the Holy Spirit *because he had not yet come down on any of them*” (8:15). Therefore, it seems they had received the Gospel, but no regenerations had happened because the Holy Spirit hadn't come down yet.

This back and forth is the contention between the mainstream and the Charismatic/Pentecostal streams of Christianity today. The mainstream side says once you're saved, you have all you need for a life of spiritual fruit and gifts. The “Spirit-filled” side says once you're saved, you need the Holy Spirit to give you the power to exercise spiritual gifts. That can happen simultaneously with or after salvation. The best thing I can share is 1) get saved if you're not by asking Jesus to take hold of your life and make you His and 2) ask Jesus for His Holy Spirit to begin working through you with His power for fruit (developing Jesus' character) and gifts (learning and using Jesus' power to minister to others).

Back to chapter 8. Simon is very impressed! As a person enamored with power and who believes power is the way to boost one's status and gain recognition, Simon wants the ability to convey the Holy Spirit's power to people. In other words, be like God, who gives His people the Holy Spirit. Peter calls Simon out on his bitterness (at being upstaged and diminished in the peoples' eyes) and wickedness (thinking God's power is something to be used and manipulated). Thankfully, the new disciple Simon asks Peter to pray for him.

Next, God sends Philip on a specific assignment. Now, as you read this section, imagine that you were Philip, and God told you to take a hike to a lonely place along a highway, a desert road, and wait. How would you respond? Yup, just like me. If I were the least unsure if God was speaking to me, I would ask for a second opinion. Therefore, Philip must either be very familiar with Jesus' voice (most likely) or the command came to him strongly (8:26).

When Philip reaches the spot, a chariot comes along with an Ethiopian Jew sitting in it, reading the scroll of Isaiah. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship and was passing the return time reading what Isaiah had to say. God tells Philip to go up to the chariot. Upon hearing Isaiah's words about God's Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53), Philip asks if the Ethiopian Eunuch understood what the prophet had written. The Ethiopian was confused over whether Isaiah was referring to himself or another Suffering Servant (8:34). I find this fascinating because when I've spoken to some rabbis in years past, they say it's about Israel, not about Isaiah or Jesus.

Anyway, Philip tells the man it's about Jesus and shares the news about Jesus. True to the Great Commission, Philip agrees to immerse the Ethiopian Jew into the new messianic Judaism. Immediately, the Holy Spirit carries Philip away (called translation) to Azotus (the Greek name for Ashdod), about 30 miles northwest of the encounter, while the Ethiopian, filled with the Holy Spirit, rejoices. And according to the Bible, that's how the Gospel first reached the region of Ethiopia.

INSIGHT

I do not doubt that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are for today and should be working through every disciple's life. When they are, we're often faced with Simon the Sorcerer's temptation to use God's power to make something more of ourselves in the eyes of others.

I've watched and studied well-known ministers who exercise the Holy Spirit's gifts in public settings. One, in particular, was boisterous, made a great show of it, and I saw that almost every audience member's attention was on him. Yes, I said audience because even though his ministry was during a church service, it was a show rather than a time of Body ministry to "strengthen, encourage, and comfort the saints" (1 Corinthians 14:3).

On the other hand, I've observed others working on the Lord's behalf in quiet, gentle, unassuming ways, reflecting Jesus' wonderful character and grace. There was the laying on of hands, prophetic words, and even a gentle falling to the ground because the Holy Spirit overwhelmed the recipient.

That's not to say ministry times can't be boisterous. Have you ever seen a demon being cast out? That can get wild at times. My point is, "Who gets the glory? Who gets the attention and the adoration? I've long taught my worship teams that it's not about us musicians or how stunning our musical skills are. It's about the Lord. As we lead worship (or minister in any other ways, for that matter), we should, in effect, become "invisible" because everyone's attention is on the Lord, not us who minister.

May the Lord raise many powerful servants who can walk in His authority and power and give Him all the glory. We owe it to the world around us to let them see the Living God in action without standing in the way.

November 13 : Scriptures Acts 9-11

SUMMARY

Now we come to another roadside conversion in chapter 9. Saul goes to Caiaphas and asks for letters to the Jewish communities and synagogues in Damascus requesting they turn over to Saul any followers of Jesus, members of the Way (as we will not call it) (9:1-2). Saul is vehemently opposed to the Jesus-professing heretics to the point of murderous threats. He is so furious over these heretics he's willing to hunt them down in distant cities to keep this Jesus movement from spreading.

As he travels to Damascus, "the light comes on." The Light of the World reveals Himself to Saul, forcing him to the ground (9:3-4). The voice asks Saul why he is persecuting Him, and Saul responds to his "Lord." Is this a general term of honor, or is it loaded with divine meaning? While my Study Bible says the title is an honorific term and doesn't indicate divinity, I think Paul is using it in general to God because a Jew would recognize a "light from heaven" that drives a person to the ground as a clear manifestation of God's presence. Furthermore, as a tremendously dedicated Jew, Saul would want to know if he's talking to Israel's God, whom he should worship, or some other divine being that he should reject.

Jesus settles the question immediately by identifying Himself by name. Combined with the manifestation of divine light, Saul gets a profound revelation that will shake up his theology and affect the rest of his life. What Saul will also come to realize is that persecuting Jesus' followers is persecuting Jesus Himself. I can see where this revelation begins to build Saul's theology of the Body of Christ early on.

The men with Saul could hear the sound but not the words (9:7). Saul, now blinded by the light, is led by his companions to Damascus, where he sits and thinks (and prays) without eating or drinking for three days as he processes what just happened to him.

Jesus calls on a Jewish believer in Damascus named Ananias to go to Saul and pray for his sight to return. Jesus has prepared Saul for this by giving him a vision in advance. According to Acts 22:12, Ananias is "a devout man according to the law, who had a good reputation with all the Jews living there." Although Ananias responds to Jesus with the Hebraic, "Here I am," meaning a readiness to submit to God and do what he's commanded (Abraham in Genesis 22:1, 11; Samuel in 1 Samuel 3:4; Isaiah in Isaiah 6:8), Ananias is understandably reluctant because he knows it would be at the risk of his life. Wouldn't you be? But Jesus has plans for Saul, including the persecution and suffering Saul was ready to unleash on Jesus' followers. Jesus reveals to Ananias, "this man is my

chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (9:15).

Ananias goes to Saul, lays his hands on the blind man, and makes sure that Saul knows it's Jesus restoring his sight (9:17). Again, deeds give credence to words. Something like scales falls from Saul's eyes (gross!). Why does Saul get baptized? Because that's the moment he "converts" to the Way with the typical outward act that reflects an inward change of heart, repentance, to be followed by a changed life.

Ya gotta love new believers! I remember how excited I was when I gave my life to Jesus as a junior in high school. Yes, my family thought I was nuts. "He's a fanatic, you know." I left tracts in the house, carried my Bible to school, and talked a lot about the Lord. How much cooler would it have been that I had Saul's Bible knowledge even though he had to correct his theology? Saul's experience rocketed him into sharing about Jesus in the same synagogues he was sent to sift for followers of the Way. The non-believing Jews were amazed and angered because Saul could refute them deftly about the once-dead, now-resurrected Jesus being the Messiah (9:20). Imagine knowing as much Bible as Saul did, and with the Holy Spirit's inspiration, he experienced the prophecies and revelations about Jesus beginning to connect. His brain must have exploded with "Aha!" moments all day, every day.

Just as Jesus predicted, it didn't take long for Saul to face persecution. When Saul learns of the Damascus Jews' plot to shut him up permanently, his fellow believers lower him over the wall to escape because the gates are being watched (9:25).

Saul returns to Jerusalem and now wants to join the messianic community. "Awkward! Like, who's going to believe him and his conversion experience?" Remember Barnabas (4:36-37)? The Son of Encouragement takes the risk and comes alongside Saul as his advocate before the Jerusalem leadership. Barnabas relates Saul's conversion experience and how much he changed, especially by talking about Jesus in Damascus. The text doesn't say if the leaders accepted Saul right away, and I imagine they withheld judgment until they could watch Saul in action. After all, Jesus taught them, "Either make the tree good and its fruit will be good, or make the tree bad and its fruit will be bad; for a tree is known by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33). Under their watchful eyes, Saul continued speaking about Jesus until the unbelieving Hellenistic Jews threatened to kill him. So, the Jerusalem community took Saul to Caesarea on the shores of the Mediterranean and shipped him off to his hometown, Tarsus (9:30). Meanwhile, the entire area of Israel (Judea, Samaria, and Galilee) had quieted down after the considerable persecution and the number of believers was still growing.

And now the camera pans from Saul to Peter. Peter travels west from Jerusalem to Joppa on Judea's coast. Along the way, in Lydda, Peter heals Aeneas in Jesus' name and raises Tabitha (Dorcas) from the dead in Joppa. Again, the deeds confirm the testimony about Jesus.

We have now come to a pivotal point in the history of the Way. The Gospel has spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, as Jesus said (Acts 1:8). The next step is "to the ends of the earth." Yup, it's time for the Gospel to reach the Gentiles, and that's what happens in chapter 10. First, Cornelius is prepared. Second, Peter is prepared. Third, the two are brought together, and the Holy Spirit ignites the global spread of the Gospel.

Cornelius is a centurion in the Italian Regiment of the Roman army. More importantly, Cornelius is a *sebomanoi*, a Gentile God-fearer who loves and respects the Jewish God and His people but hasn't converted. The Lord comes to Cornelius in a dream and tells him to call for a man named Simon, nicknamed Peter, who's staying in Joppa, about 33 miles south of Caesarea along the coast (10:5). That's it. Cornelius doesn't get any more information than that. I don't know about you, but I'd be very curious about that vision, and like Cornelius, I would send people immediately to fetch this Simon guy.

Meanwhile, in Joppa, Peter goes up to the flat roof of Simon the Tanner's house for a bit of prayer time (10:9). What happens next is an unusual vision that many Christians misunderstand. The Lord puts Peter into a trance where he sees a vision of a sheet being lowered, filled with representatives of all the earth's animals, reptiles, and birds. Since reptiles are non-kosher, i.e., not even qualified as food (non-kosher critters are "not foods"), the sheet is filled with kosher and non-kosher creatures. And yet, Jesus commands Peter to dig in. Peter responds, "No, Lord! For I have never eaten anything impure and ritually unclean" (10:14), to which the Lord (Jesus) responds, "What God has made clean, do not call impure." This vision happens three times because Jesus has to overcome the fault in Peter's thinking about what qualifies a person to enter God's kingdom.

When Christians read this out of context, the immediate assumption is often made that God is telling Peter that He's suspending the kosher laws and everything is back on the menu. No way. The vision isn't about food. It's about *exclusion* because non-kosher creatures are *excluded* from the Jewish menu. The vision is Jesus' way of preparing Peter for a paradigm shift.

Up to this point, Gentiles could enter God's kingdom only if they converted fully to become Jews. Also, because Gentiles didn't know God's Torah, they lived in ways that

rendered them ritually impure. Thus, Jews were careful about interacting with Gentiles. Because of this paradigm and very real concerns about ritual purity, Gentiles were regarded as off-limits and “far-off,” “*excluded* from the citizenship of Israel” (Ephesians 2:12-13, italics author).

God is preparing Peter to “cross the line” between included Jews and excluded (ritually impure, non-kosher) Gentiles that will start to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth. During Peter’s presentation to Cornelius, the Lord will “erase the line” between Jew and Gentile relative to salvation through Jesus. Shortly, Gentiles will be able to join the Jews in God’s kingdom without becoming Jews.

Because this paradigm shift is worldview-altering for Peter, the Holy Spirit shepherds him along the way, “go with them with no doubts at all, because I have sent them” (10:20). The men tell Peter that an angel of the Lord told their master to send for him for a message, which confirms what the Spirit already was working on Peter’s heart and mind. They set out the next day, and it takes two days to get to Cornelius’ home.

Everybody must be greatly anticipating something because Cornelius, in response to the vision, has invited family and friends to hear what God has to say through Peter (10:24). When Peter arrives, Cornelius falls at his feet in honor of his guest. Although it says Cornelius worshiped Peter, that wouldn’t be right because Cornelius would know, as a God-fearer, that worship belongs to God alone. Cornelius’ action was meant to honor Peter. However, even Peter misunderstands this because he says, “Stand up. I myself am also a man” (10:26), perhaps thinking Cornelius is just another idol-worshiping Gentile.

What Peter says next in 10:28 should be understood this way, “You know it’s against cultural norms and not considered right for a Jewish man to associate with or visit someone outside of the tribe for reasons of ritual uncleanness. But God has shown me that I can’t regard non-Jews as impure or unclean simply because they’re not ‘of the tribe,’ i.e., Jewish.”

So there Peter is, along with Cornelius and the crew. What does Jesus have planned? Something really mind-blowing!

Cornelius tells Peter what the Lord said about calling for him, and now that Peter is present, the whole group is waiting to hear what Peter has to say. First, Peter says he knows God doesn’t play favorites (10:34) and that He welcomes any person who “fears Him and does what is right.” So far, so good. Peter continues with a straightforward Gospel message of peace with God through Jesus. 1) God sent the message to the Jews

first that Jesus is the Lord over everything. 2) Jesus came, was anointed by God, and proved it by doing miraculous things of which Peter is a witness. 3) Jesus was killed by crucifixion (an execution about which Cornelius would know) and rose from the dead. Jesus is alive! 4) All people, Jews, and Gentiles, will be judged by Jesus, and 5) the Torah and the Prophets foretold that “through his name everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins” (10:43).

Peter doesn't even get to make an altar call. His testimony and the Gentiles' faith in God open the way for heaven to come to earth. Peter and the believing Jews with him watch as Jesus fills the Gentiles with His Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in other languages, as proof they were born again into the New Covenant.

Cornelius and crew needed Peter to share the Gospel. Peter needed to see the Gentiles saved and filled with the Spirit to complete the paradigm shift that all people from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth could come to Israel's God through Jesus and that Israel's God was indeed the God of all peoples, not one ethnic group.

This event is pivotal because the Jew-Gentile separation mindset would also have to be changed at the leadership level. But for now, water immersion was required to recognize the new believers' transformation and acceptance into the growing messianic community (10:47-48).

Did I mention there was going to be a clash over Gentiles coming into the messianic community without going through the “official” Jewish conversion process? It didn't take long for the news of the Gentiles' conversion to the Way to spread throughout Judea.

Who were those of the “circumcision party” who criticized Peter for “breaking the barrier” by eating with Gentiles? The circumcision party was Jewish believers who insisted that Gentiles couldn't join Jesus' community only by trusting in God and His Messiah, Jesus. The Gentiles must first become Jewish proselytes by renouncing idolatry, embracing Yehovah, being circumcised if male, and committing to follow God's Torah. They criticized Peter for fellowshipping with Gentiles and compromising God's laws by welcoming the Gentiles into the faith without the conversion process. However, Peter has an explanation and recounts what happened to prove that it wasn't his idea to incorporate the Gentiles into Jesus' Body of believers. God Himself proved it by filling the believing Gentile with His Holy Spirit (11:17). You can almost see Peter holding up his hands and saying, “What could I do? Who am I to argue with Jesus?”

News of God's unilateral act silences Peter's critics. God welcoming Gentiles without requiring circumcision? Unheard of! But if that's what the Lord wants, "they glorified God, saying, 'So then, God has given repentance resulting in life even to the Gentiles'" (11:18).

While this was happening, the persecution touched off by Stephen's martyrdom forces believing Jews to scatter along Israel's coast north into Phoenicia (modern-day Lebanon) and up to Antioch on the border between Phoenicia and Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). They also reached Cyprus (the island in the Mediterranean to the west of Lebanon). However, true to the old paradigm and unaware of God's recent inclusion of Gentiles, these believers only reached out to fellow Jews (11:19). However, as the Gospel came to Antioch, a large number of Hellenists came to faith in Jesus (11:21). Hellenists were Jews who lived in the Greco-Roman culture and spoke Greek. The cross-cultural Jewish/Gentile nature of Antioch would make it early Christianity's foremost Gentile mission.

When news about Antioch reaches Jerusalem, the core leaders send Barnabas to check out the genuineness of their faith. Impressed by God's grace, Barnabas (the son of encouragement) encourages the new believers to "remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts" (11:23). To help with their discipleship, Barnabas searches out the best man for the job – Saul. A Jew by birth who was familiar with the Gentile culture and the Greek language and deeply educated in God's word. Gee, everything the growing Jewish-Gentile messianic community in Antioch needed to help them grow in numbers and spiritual maturity.

At the end of chapter 11, prophets come to Antioch from Jerusalem, and while they are there, the Holy Spirit reveals a coming famine throughout the Roman empire. The community springs into action by taking up a collection for the soon-to-be needy in Jerusalem. The Antioch church sends it by Barnabas and Saul, who will soon team up for a different purpose.

INSIGHT

Jesus promised us that we would be persecuted for standing with Him (John 15:20; Matthew 24:9). When it happens, and it will to some extent, be glad because you're reflecting Jesus to a world system that hates God. That is unless you're acting obnoxiously. In that case, a little persecution is needed to set us straight and help us mature.

What about our persecutors? What should we do about them? We're to pray for them (Matthew 5:44) and to bless them (Romans 12:14). Why? Because they often aren't aware of what they're doing and why. This is why Jesus prayed for His Father to forgive those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). Stephen followed Jesus' example (Acts 7:60).

Rather than attack our persecutors, we should pray for them because God can take hold of them, save them, and turn them into a force to be reckoned with like Saul/Paul (9:3-8). Some of the harshest persecutors in history have become some of Jesus' greatest servants. Pray for those who persecute you and your fellow Christians around the world. Let's watch the Lord confound the enemy's plans!

November 14 : Scriptures Acts 12-13

SUMMARY

The persecution that began with Stephen continued. Chapter 12 opens with Herod attacking Jewish believers, including one of the Twelve, James, John's brother (12:1). Since attacking the Jewish believers pleased the non-believing Jews, Herod Agrippa I continues by arresting Peter to keep him out of the way during Passover. Remember, Passover was a highly-charged time in Jerusalem with high messianic expectations among the Jews. Herod and the Jewish leaders didn't need the messianic Jews preaching to the crowds and inciting another riot like the one the previous year when Jesus was crucified. Peter's imprisonment probably warned the believers to keep their heads down and mouths shut. But the believers refuse to stay quiet. Instead, they pray fervently for Peter (12:5).

Who says prayer doesn't work? The Lord answered them – remarkably (12:7-10)! At first, Peter thinks he sees a vision when the angel shows up to escort him from jail. But after the angel disappears, Peter realizes it was no vision. I'm pretty sure he stood in the empty, dark streets for a while, patting and pinching himself to make sure what just happened was real (12:11). Peter is convinced and runs to John Mark's mom's house, where the believers are gathered for their prayer meeting. As he knocks on the outer gate and calls out, Rhoda, the servant, recognizes his voice, and for joy, *she runs in the opposite direction to tell the prayer meeting the good news, leaving Peter standing in the street!* Doesn't she know he's a wanted man? Even funnier, the prayer group refuses to believe Peter is out of jail, the very thing they've been praying for. (Sorry, this cracks me up.) It takes Rhoda's insistence for them to get up and see if what she's saying is true. Seeing Peter in the flesh, they stand there dumbfounded.

After letting Peter in, he tells them what happened and to tell James and the brothers. This James is not the James Herod Agrippa I killed that sparked this whole episode. This James (actually, Jacob, as it would be in Hebrew) is Jesus' half-brother who, by that time, had become the leader of the Jerusalem congregation. He's the same James/Jacob who wrote the letter we will read on December 19 (if you're keeping up. But hey, no pressure!). That makes James the President (the Rosh HaKenesset/Head of the Assembly). After relaying what happened, Peter beats feet to an unknown location for safety (12:17).

Well, it doesn't go well for the unfortunate soldiers who were executed for not stopping Peter's escape (12:19). After that, Herod Agrippa goes from Jerusalem to Caesarea (on the coast) to stay there for a while. But Herod gets his. Because of his pride, God strikes him down in a hideous way. I find it ironic that Herod Agrippa had attacked Jesus' Body and struck down James, so the Lord attacked and struck down his body (12:22-23). And while

Herod's body dies, Jesus' Body continues to grow and flourish. The Barnabas and Saul team return to (from) Jerusalem with John Mark (12:24-25). Using "from" makes more sense since the team had traveled from Antioch to Jerusalem on the aid mission, met up with John Mark, who was likely already in Jerusalem, and returned to Antioch, where chapter 13 picks up.

Back in Antioch, there are prophets and teachers (Ephesians 4:11-13) in action. As they worship, the Holy Spirit speaks to them and tells them to send out the first official mission team. While Jews had come to faith in Jesus at Shavuot/Pentecost from all parts of the Roman empire (Acts 2) and took their newfound faith home to their synagogues, other believers were scattered via persecution (Acts 8). However, there's no recorded proselytizing team dispatched yet. Barnabas and Saul are that first team (13:2-3).

Now would be a good time to read the maps at the back of your Bible and bookmark them. Or search the map of Paul's 1st, 2nd, and 3rd missionary journeys online. Print it off and have it handy for the rest of the book of Acts. You'll see how the Holy Spirit directed Saul/Paul from Antioch to Asia Minor, Greece, and Sicily to Italy. Saul covered a lot of territories!

They depart Antioch and travel to the coastal city of Seleucia. Then Saul and Barnabas take a boat to Cyprus and the city of Salamis. So, what does this team of Jewish teachers who believe Jesus is the Messiah do? They and John Mark immediately go to the local synagogue to proclaim God's word about Jesus (13:5). Remember that the Christian faith at that time was still primarily Jewish and focused on bringing the Good News of Messiah, Jesus, to His people, the Jews. The text doesn't say how successful the team was.

Next, the team travels west across Cyprus to the city of Paphos. When they arrive, they are met with an interesting situation. Saul and Barnabas confront a Jewish false prophet, Elymas, who opposes God's work and tries to prevent them from speaking to the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, "an intelligent man" (13:7), who wants to hear about the Jewish Messiah. Saul (now called Paul) has enough of Elymas' demonic interference, and by the Lord's power, Elymas is struck blind, and proconsul Sergius comes to faith big time (13:12).

What about Paul's name change here? As a Hebrew-speaking Jew, Saul's name is Sha'ul. But as a Roman citizen from the Gentile city of Tarsus, he took on the more Roman name Paulos. Why? It would have made him more familiar and accessible to Gentiles due to prejudice against Jews in the Roman empire. Paul truly was a cross-cultural missionary. From this point in the book of Acts, Saul is called Paul.

The team leaves Paphos and sails north from Cyprus to the southern coast of Asia Minor. After reaching the city of Perga, John Mark abandons the mission and heads back home to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas continue north to the inland city of Antioch in Pisidia (not the Antioch in Syria from where they began their outreach). As good Jews would do, Paul and Barnabas go to the synagogue (13:14). After reading the Sabbath's Torah and Haftarah scripture portions, the synagogue elders ask the visiting teachers if they want to share an encouraging word with the congregation. Paul raises his hand and begins by addressing the Jews ("fellow Israelites") and Gentiles ("you who fear God") in attendance (13:16).

Paul gets right to the point. God chose the Israelites and prospered them while they were in Egypt. He "put up with them" (yes, that's what it says) during the Wilderness wandering (which probably brought some chuckles from the congregation), brought them into the land, and gave them judges like Samuel. After the people asked for a king, the Lord gave them Saul, followed by David, "man after my own heart, who will carry out all my will." Do you see how Paul sets them up to see Jesus as David's rightful successor? Then Paul drops the bomb – Jesus is the promised heir of King David. John, God's promised "Elijah," prepared the people to receive Jesus as their Messiah.

As God's people, "it is to us that the word of this salvation has been sent" (13:26). But salvation required that Jesus be crucified to establish it for His people. That meant the Jewish leaders and residents of Jerusalem had to have a hand in the matter. They "did not recognize him or the sayings of the prophets that are read every Sabbath, they have fulfilled their words by condemning him" (13:27). This was a cooperative venture between the Jews and the Roman Gentiles, specifically Pilate. But God raised Jesus from the dead as witnessed by the disciples (13:31), and Paul is here to bring the Jews and God-fearers the Good News about their Messiah (13:32-33). Jesus' resurrection was also prophesied by the scriptures (13:34-37).

And now Paul "lands the plane." "Therefore, let it be known to you, brothers and sisters, that through this man forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you. Everyone who believes is justified through him from everything that you could not be justified from through the law of Moses" (13:38-39). Paul finishes by warning them about rejecting the message even if they struggle with it making sense to their rational minds.

After the Sabbath service, many of the Jews respond positively to what Paul shared, and they ask him to speak about Jesus on the next Sabbath. He and Barnabas continue to share with the Jews who follow them out of the synagogue. The Great News brings many to the synagogue the following Sabbath to hear about Israel's Messiah. However, the Gospel

and the team's popularity spark great jealousy among the Jews, who begin to vociferously contradict Paul and resort to insulting him. There comes the point when it's obvious people don't want to listen. There's no sense in talking to those who will not listen, and that's what Paul faces. It's best to go with those willing to listen and seriously consider God's offer. Therefore, Paul declares, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first. Since you reject it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we are turning to the Gentiles" (13:46). Paul fulfills what Jesus spoke to Ananias after Paul's Damascus Road conversion, "this man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites" (9:15).

Paul's words stoke the God-fearing Gentiles' faith, and the message of the Jewish Messiah spreads throughout the region, drawing many Gentiles into the messianic Jewish faith. Sadly, the unbelieving Jews have had enough of Paul and begin to persecute him and Barnabas, driving them from the area (13:50). The team shakes the dust off their feet (i.e., call it quits with the antagonistic Jews) and travels east about 95 miles to Iconium. The chapter ends on an up note with the new disciples being filled with the Spirit and joy!

INSIGHT

Peter's angelic jailbreak is a remarkable example of divine intervention. I've read and heard testimonies from missionaries and fellow Christians about their experiences with angelic appearances in times of need.

But what about the rest of us who've had no such prominent angelic appearances? Not to fear. Scripture tells us we also have angels at work in our lives in myriad ways. "Are they (the angels) not all ministering spirits sent out to serve those who are going to inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14). That means *you* have at least one angel watching over and serving you. How cool is that?

How often have angels intervened on our behalf, and we were completely unaware? Jesus knows. It'll be fun to meet those angels and thank them for their help. Maybe Jesus will show us all the times they were ministering to us, and we were clueless.